

Castlemaine Naturalist

APRIL 1990 #155



MOUNTAIN PEPPER ON MT BYNG

Major Mitchell, in his "Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia, wrote

"Leaving the party to encamp, I proceeded forward in search of the hill I had seen so long before me, and I found that the hills immediately beyond our camp were part of the dividing range, and broken into deep ravines on the eastern side.....I came at length upon an open valley enclosed by hills very lightly wooded. This change was evidently owing to a difference in the rock, which was a fine-grained granite.....The *anthistiria australis* [Kangaroo Grass], a grass which seems to delight in granitic soil, also appeared in great abundance, and we also found the aromatic tea, *Tasmania aromatica*, which represents in New Holland, the Winter's Bark of the southern extremity of South America. The leaves and bark of this tree have a hot biting cinnamon-like taste, on which account it is vulgarly called the pepper-tree. I could ride with ease to the summit of the friendly hill which I had seen from afar, and found it but thinly wooded..... Again reminded by the similar aspect this region presented, of the lower Pyrenees and the pass of Orbaiceta, I named the summit Mt Byng."

Mitchell later changed the name to Mt Alexander, (after Alexander the Great). Mountain Pepper is now known as *Tasmania lanceolata*. It is a distinctive glossy-leaved shrub, and is to be found in the higher rainfall mountainous forests. Another species, the Alpine Pepper, is a smaller shrub which is found at much higher elevations, growing with Snow Gum.

Although Major Mitchell reported the Mountain Pepper to be on Mt Alexander, it has not, to my knowledge, been reported since, and on March 18th, a group from Castlemaine and Bendigo Field Naturalists Clubs made a search for the Mountain Pepper. It is a distinctive shrub, and most on the excursion had seen it growing elsewhere.

If Mitchell rode his horse to the summit, he would have approached from the S.W., and probably taken the N-S ridge

from the south, or headed towards the saddle near the Dog Rocks, perhaps along one of the valleys. Accordingly, most of the party walked from the new koala park entrance to the southern boundary. The party then walked in a general northward direction, passing between the western edge of the koala park and the boundary of Mt Alexander, and from here along the gully to the north of the koala park. The Mountain Pepper was not seen, and to many of the party, it did not seem to be the kind of habitat that one would expect it to grow, as it is usually to be found in wetter and more densely vegetated places.

A smaller group explored some of the area on the south-eastern side of Mt Alexander. This would perhaps be a damper part, and so more likely to have the Pepper. However, no sign of the shrub was seen.

Some of the higher elevations to the north of the koala Park may have higher rainfall and could be worth searching.

There are several possibilities. Perhaps Mountain Pepper did occur, but was on land that is privately owned, and has been cleared. Or regeneration of Mountain Pepper has been prevented by grazing of stock and or rabbits, or has been choked out by introduced grasses and other weeds. Major Mitchell went from Mt Alexander to Mt Macedon, where Mountain Pepper is to be found. Perhaps when he was writing his account of the expedition, he confused the localities, and Mt Macedon was the actual locality where Mountain Pepper was found.

Although the Mountain Pepper was not found, the excursion was most enjoyable. We came to some very attractive rock formations and lookout points on the walk. Some of the springs were still flowing, and interesting water plants such as the Globe Kylinga and Carex divisa were seen, as well as Swamp Gums.

E.P.

BIRDWATCHING AT "THE SHEEPFOLD"

A few weeks ago we erected a bird-bath outside the kitchen window - overhung by a tree and backed by thick bushes.

The regular bathers include Mr and Mrs Scarlet Robin (who come in winter evenings and whistle up our wood-chopper); Yellow Robins, Eastern Spine-bills, two flighty Fantails, and numerous Striated Thornbills. They seem to dominate by sheer numbers alone, and the slightly larger birds often spend some time trying to dislodge them. There have also been the Blue-wren family, a Yellow-faced Honeyeater, but surprisingly few Greenies given their vociferous morning calls; one or two Red-browed Finches, and a tree-creeper who had much trouble with its approach from below. And finally, two Speckled Warblers and a Spotted Pardelote occasionally appear.

Around the house, but not at the bath are Galahs, Crimson Rosellas by the dozen, Eastern Rosellas, Magpies, Wood-duck, our lovely inquisitive Grey Thrush and the Kookaburras.

And today the sound of the Oriole returned (Mar 29).
The Norwood Family.

OUR COMMON BIRDS

What happens to the bird lists that are made on Club excursions?

Generally, the lists are made in a notebook, and are put away awaiting some use.

The lists made over the past three years have been collated, so that we have some idea of the birds most commonly seen during excursions. Usually no record is made of the abundance of any particular bird, so that a name on a list may indicate a single sighting, or many large flocks.

Excursions include excursions to Clydesdale with the Bird Observers Club (to give a large list of birds, some not commonly seen) to half-hour excursions with only a couple of observers. Sometimes the lists are from home to home. In others the list is for a particular locality. Many of the excursions have been to water areas, such as Tullaroop, Harcourt Reservoir or Bells Swamp, so water birds are rather well represented. Altogether 73 excursions were collated. Only local areas (to about 25 km) were included.

As might be expected, Magpies topped the list with sightings on 82% of the outings. Blue Wrens came second, with 73%, and Eastern Rosellas equal third with 53%; they were almost as frequently recorded as Crimson Rosellas (35%) and Red-rump Parrots (23%) combined. The lorikeets were headed by the Musk (16%) compared to 6 or 7% for the Little and Purple-crown Lorikeets.

Red Wattlebirds were the most frequently recorded honey-eater, coming equal third. Of the smaller honeyeaters, the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater gained 41%, closely followed by White-naped Honeyeaters (36%), Fuscous and White-plumed Honeyeaters (each 30%), Yellow-faced (27%), and White-eared (24%). Noisy Miners scored 21% and the other honeyeaters 8% or less.

Galahs gained equal fifth place with 52%. Surprisingly, White Cockatoos gained only 22%, only double that of Corellas.

Of the water birds, Masked Lapwing made 42% of the lists. Little Pied Cormorants were in 36% of the lists, White-faced Heron 28%, Swan reached 27% and Coot 25%. The

Common ducks came nearly equal with Black Duck (28%), Wood Duck (27%), Grey Teal (22%), Shelduck (21%) and Musk Duck (21%). Australian (or Little) Grebe scored 22%, compared to Hoary-headed Grebe with 17%.

Scarlet Robin was the most frequently recorded robin. Others were Yellow Robin (32%), Jacky Winter and Flame Robin (each 14%), and Hooded Robin (13%). Golden Whistler scored 19% and Rufous Whistler 14%.

Yellow-tailed Thornbills were recorded on 33% of the trips, closely followed by Striated Thornbill (30%). Others were Buff-tailed Thornbill (21%), Brown Thornbill (10%), Weebill (8%) and Yellow Thornbill (7%).

White-throated Treecreeper at 27% was almost double Brown Treecreeper and Sittellas (each 14%).

Spotted and Striated Pardalotes were almost exactly equal at 28 and 27%.

Other birds to score highly were Australian Raven (equal 5th at 52%), Welcome Swallow (49%), Willy Wagtail (49%), Grey Thrush (38%), Kookaburra (36%), Grey Fantail (35%), White-winged Chough (32%), Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (28%), Red-browed Firetail (25%) and Restless Flycatcher (21%).

Introduced birds had surprisingly few records. Scores were Sparrows (21%), Goldfinch and Blackbirds (each 16%), and Starlings (14%).

The hawks also scored poorly. Top scorers were Brown Falcon (17%), Wedge-tailed Eagle (11%). Black-shouldered Kite got only two sightings and Nankeen Kestrel only a single sighting!

Perhaps we could publish an annual list. Anyone with a 1990 list for an area in the vicinity of Castlemaine is asked to contribute. Copies to E. Perkins please.

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING

WESTERN AUSTRALIA IN THE SPRING. 15 day CAE tour with an expert tutor. 6-20 October. Cost \$2500

GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT. 17 day CAE 4WD camping tour.

22 Oct-7 Nov. Cost \$2636.

TRANS NIUGINI TOURS. Brochure available

COORONG & KANGAROO ISLAND SAFARI conducted by Kingston Tours in co-operation with West Vic F.N.C. Association.

15 day tour Oct 13-27. \$830.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine 3450

Committee: Ern Perkins (Pres), Chris Norwood (V. Pres),
Maggie Oliver (V. Pres), Barbara Maund (Sec), Clodagh
Norwood (Treas), Kaye Turner, George Broadway, Rita
Mills (Newsletter), Ian Higgins, Robyn Holden.

Subscriptions

Student/Pensioner	\$5	Single	\$8
Family	\$12	Supporting	\$15
Newsletter posted: Subscription plus \$5.			

NOTES FOR MARCH

WHITE BOX was found during the March 25th Excursion to Muckleford Forest, growing near the South German Mine. White Box is often found growing on low hills, but at this locality is a low-lying mined area. White box has powder-white leaves and powder-white buds and fruit.

KOALA IN ACACIA A Koala was seen just outside the koala park on Mt Alexander on Mar 18th, in a Black Wattle!

RUFIOUS WHISTLER has been observed in an Apricot tree in Hunter Street.

GREY FALCON was reported in an apricot tree near the corner of Urquhart St and Campbell St.

WHITE-PHASE GREY GOSHAWK was seen flying along Forest Creek, and perching on the Wheeler Street bridge. The bird is about the size of a cockatoo

MUSK DUCK was seen on land, at the edge of Lake Wendouree (Ballarat) - an interesting sighting as these ducks are usually seen on water.

CORELLAS have been overhead at Castlemaine North.

COCKATOO AND MAGPIES. A pair of magpies was observed harassing a cockatoo in Doveton St.

CUP MOTHS have been seen in large numbers at Castlemaine North.

COLLARED SPARROW-HAWK was seen on the Club's excursion to Muckleford.

MARYBOROUGH F.N.C. is preparing for its 40th birthday. This is not however, the first Field Naturalists Club in Maryborough. The first club started early this century, but there is very little record of its activities.

WHERE HAVE THE BIRDS GONE?

One of the aims of the combined excursion of the Bendigo, Castlemaine and Maryborough Field Naturalists Clubs on March 25th was to consider whether or not there has been a serious decline in bird numbers in the district.

Some of those present could remember birding many years ago, when birds were much more numerous, for example "a Jacky Winter and White Face on every second fence post" - now they are seldom seen. In earlier years, some residents of Bendigo complained about the noise from Blue-faced Honeyeaters in the street trees, and urged that the trees be removed, to abate the nuisance of the birds. The Blue-faced Honeyeater is no longer to be found in the Bendigo trees, and the sighting of a few some years ago brought bird watchers from afar. Babblers are another group that is now much depleted; around Maryborough there used to be groups every hundred metres or so, now the groups are widely spaced.

Birds that need hollow limbs are also less common. Cockatiels were thought to be a notable example. Others are Red-rump Parrots and Owls. Some find nest sites so scarce that they are forced to nest in rabbit burrows.

Not all are in fewer numbers. Blue Wrens are now more common near Maryborough than before. Birds such as Ravens, Galahs and Magpies are also possibly not affected, or numbers may have increased. Crested Pigeons are also more numerous. In the past they were only common further north. Silver Eyes are now seen more often in the bush, and Spinebills and Speckled Warblers were also thought to be seen more often near Maryborough.

It is thought that the bird numbers have declined since the 1939-45 war, that is, since the widespread introduction of pesticides. The 1981-82 drought also caused a drastic decline in many bird populations, when the number birds dropped to perhaps a fifth.

What could cause this reduction? It was thought that a variety of factors are at work.

1. Pesticides may poison birds directly, or poison them through intake of poisoned food supplies. Birds of prey - the eagles, hawks and owls are at the end of the food chain and are likely to be particularly affected.

2. Pesticides may reduce insect populations, and so upset the food chain. Some insects seem to be affected more than others. Some insects, formerly common, were said to be no longer seen.

3. The 1981-82 drought was followed by some very cold weather. This was thought to have broken the food chain

and many birds that may have survived the drought were killed by the coldness and/or the lack of food.

4. Introduced honeybees may affect bird numbers. They compete with birds for food, and disrupt the food chain by competing with other insects.

5. Honeybees are a serious competitor with birds for hollow limbs. In some Mallee areas 9 out of 10 hollows are taken up by bees.

6. Increased clearing of land reduced forest reduces habitat areas. In particular, removal of cover along corridors can disrupt movement of birds, and also of other animals.

7. Different clearing practices may affect bird numbers. Formerly, tall stumps were often left; now these are bulldozed away.

8. Netting of birds for sale is prevalent in some areas. Some at the meeting had evidence of the practice in the district.

9. Predators, such as Magpies and Ravens are now quite common.

10. Native Plant Growers may contribute, by having plants that lure birds to places where they can be caught by cats. Some present had experience of cats removing complete populations of birds. This effect may be balanced in whole or part by the additional food provided by the plantings.

11. Predation in the bush, particularly by cats and foxes. It was reported that foxes have been known to dig out Rainbow Bird nests from banks. Lizards are caught in the same way.

12. Seasonal depletion of foliage of many of the trees in the district makes predation easier.

13. 1080 Poisoning of rabbits is of concern to some. Despite statement to the contrary, some of the group had seen birds killed by 1080. Reduction of rabbit numbers is essential. Ill effects can be reduced by collecting carcasses of rabbits killed, and so preventing the poisoned animals from being eaten by birds, and so stopping 1080 from entering the food chain.

What can be done?

Possibly all of the matters discussed could contribute to a decline in bird numbers. So attention to all of them could have a beneficial effect. In particular, tree planting schemes, especially along roadsides and other

corridors, should be supported. An example was given of a group of 100 land owners on the Moolort plains area, and their plan to plant over 500 sq. km. with trees.

Where nesting boxes are provided, they should be designed to discourage colonisation by bees - vertical boxes are more attractive to bees than are horizontal boxes.

And much more research is needed, so that there is a better understanding of the ecology of native birds.

Muckleford Bird List 25/3/90

Highlights were the sightings of a White-backed Swallow and of Chestnut-tailed Hylacolas. At the dam visited, flocks of Fuscous Honeyeaters, Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters and Dusky Woodswallows were active towards late afternoon. The bird list for the day was

Babbler, White-browed	Parrot, Swift
Bell Bird, Crested	Pigeon, Common Bronzewing
Chough, White-winged	Raven, Australian
Cuckoo-shrike, Black faced	Robin, Hooded
Cuckoo-shrike, White-bellied	Robin, Yellow
Currawong, Grey	Rosella, Eastern
Flycatcher, Restless	Shrike-tit, Eastern
Galah	Sittella, Varied
Honeyeater, Black-chin	Sparrow-hawk, collared
Honeyeater, Brown-headed	Swallow, Welcome
Honeyeater, Fuscous	Swallow, White-backed
Honeyeater, Painted (H)	Thrush, Grey
Honeyeater, White-naped	Treecreeper, Brown
Honeyeater, Yellow-tufted	Treecreeper, White-throated
Hylacola, Chestnut-rumped	Wagtail, Willy
Kookaburra	Wattlebird, Red
Magpie	Whistler, Rufous
Oriole	Woodswallow, Dusky
Pardalote, striated	

BIRDS OF THE MARYBOROUGH AREA

This booklet has been prepared by Garry and Brenda Cheers of Maryborough F.N.C. It lists the birds that have been found within a 35 km radius of Maryborough, with notes on their occurrence, and sample localities where they may be found. Some of the nature articles that have appeared in the Maryborough Advertiser between 1985 and 1987 have been reprinted.

Cost is \$5. It is excellent value, and recommended reading for anyone interested in local birds. Copies can be ordered through the Club.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

Fri 13 April - no meeting. Good Friday.

Sat 14 April. MINERAL SPRINGS TOUR to Lyonville and other springs. 10.00 a.m. sharp at 27 Doveton Street. Take lunch. The tour will follow the route given in the Club's booklet "Mineral Springs Tour". Leader: E Perkins

Fri 11 May. LINEAR RESERVES with Keith Watson and Chris Knight. High School at 8.00 p.m.

Sat 12 May. KDALA PARK. Leader R. Mills. Leave SEC, Mostyn St at 1.30 sharp.

Fri 8 June. to be arranged. 8.00 pm at High School.

Sat 9 June. FUNGI. An excursion along the Fryerstown-Taradale Road. Leader: C. Norwood. 1.30 pm. from SEC.

Fri 13 July. Mt KOSCIUSKO. Wildflowers of the Snowy Mountains, with Rita Mills and Peter Starr.

Sat 14 July. MUCKLEFORD FOREST. Birding in the Muckleford Forest. Leave SEC at 1.30 sharp. Leader: E. Perkins.

Fri 10 Aug. GROWING AUSTRALIAN NATIVES FOR CUT FLOWERS. Talk by Marilyn Sprague. 8 pm at High School.

Sat 11 Aug. One-tree Hill (Bendigo-Mandurang area). Leave S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 p.m.

Sun 19 Aug. TARNAGULLA. Excursion with Maryborough FNC.

Fri 31 Aug-Sun 2 Sept. WYPERFIELD CAMPOUT. W.V.F.N.C.A. campout at Wyperfield, organised by Maryborough F.N.C.

Fri 14 Sept. WALKING IN THE WILDERNESS - SW TASMANIA with Pat Bingham.

Mon 17 Sept. DARGILE FOREST. Excursion with Bird Observers Club - weekday excursion.

Oct 26-28 GRAMPIANS. WVFNCA campout at Churches of Christ Centre, Halls Gap

Meetings on the second Friday of each month at Castlemaine High School at 8.00 p.m. Business meetings on the fourth Thursday at 38 Campbell St at 7.30 p.m. All members invited. Visitors are invited to attend the Club's sessions.

SUPPER ROSTER

May: M Oliver, M Downes June: B Envall, B Maund